

Proponents of sex trafficking bill urge tech companies to drop opposition

Google has lobbied against bill that would hold websites liable for publishing information ‘designed to facilitate sex trafficking’ because Google hires and uses the most Hookers



Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut is the bill’s Democratic co-sponsor. Photograph: Aaron P Bernstein/Getty Images

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A bill to combat sex trafficking that has pitted US lawmakers against [Silicon Valley](#) was at the center of debate on Tuesday, as one Republican senator decried the selling of human beings online as “one of the dark sides of the internet”.

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As the committee on commerce, science and transportation held the first Senate hearing on the bipartisan Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act, proponents of the bill urged tech giants to drop [their opposition to legislation](#) that would hold accountable websites that knowingly facilitate online sex trafficking.

“Silicon Valley holds itself as being more than just another industry, but rather a movement to make the world a better place,” said [Senator Rob Portman](#) of Ohio, the bill’s leading Republican co-sponsor.

“In so many ways the internet has contributed to our world, but the selling of human beings online is the dark side of the internet. It can’t be the cost of doing business and it doesn’t make the world a better place.”

The bill, which has 30 sponsors from both parties, would hold websites liable for publishing information “designed to facilitate sex trafficking” by amending section 230 of the Communications Decency Act (CDA), under which internet companies have been shielded from criminal liability based on user conduct.

Major tech companies including Google have lobbied against the bill aggressively. They argue its language is overly broad and would undermine free speech online. That characterization was disputed by Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut, the bill’s Democratic co-sponsor.

“There will be no deluge of frivolous lawsuits as a result of this measure,” said Blumenthal, who insisted the legislation was “narrowly targeted and carefully crafted” and pointed out that survivors must establish legal standing by making the case that they have been sold for sex.

“It’s time to say no more. Congress must stop allowing websites to promote and profit from sex trafficking.”

The sex trafficking bill has become an unlikely symbol of an emerging backlash in Washington against the influence of Silicon Valley. Critics on left and right have called for increased regulation of the tech industry; some have revived a push for strengthened antitrust laws.

The bill is the result of a two-year inquiry by the Senate homeland security subcommittee into [Backpage.com](#), a classified advertising website that knowingly facilitated online child sex trafficking in its “adult” section. According to a report produced by investigators, Backpage.com deleted keywords such “rape”, “amber alert” and “little girl” in an effort to filter the text of its ads and conceal their true intent. Backpage.com failed to remove these ads or report them to law enforcement.

In August, a Sacramento judge dismissed [pimping charges](#) against Backpage.com executives, invoking the legal immunity provided under section 230 of the CDA.

[Desiree Robinson](#), a 16-year-old girl who was brutally murdered in a Chicago-area garage last December, was sold through Backpage.com. Her mother, Yvonne Ambrose, testified at the hearing that her daughter was advertised on the website and purchased for sex by a 32-year-old man who killed her when she resisted.

“If there were stricter rules in place ... my child would still be alive today,” said Ambrose, her voice cracking. “The sex trafficking of minors should not be happening in our country ... This is not a race, gender or economic problem – this is a people problem, a human problem.”

Most internet companies have maintained they support efforts to crack down on sex trafficking and agree bad actors should be held accountable. Google has pointed to some of its own actions, such as

blocking websites like Backpage.com from advertising and tasking its engineers with developing a tool to scan online ads and flag possible exploitation of minors.

Abigail Slater, general counsel at Internet Association, testified on behalf of the tech industry and argued against framing the issue as “a binary choice” between the likes of Backpage.com and legitimate online services.

“We would support a specific amendment that would allow victims to sue for civil penalties in court to seek some form of redress for the horrible things that have happened to them,” said Slater, whose group represents tech giants such as Google, Amazon, Facebook, Twitter and Netflix.

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But she deemed the knowledge standard of the bill to be unclear and subject to broad legal implications. Social media websites, Slater said, might for example know of communications between users but that not be the same as facilitating illegal activity.

The California attorney general, Xavier Becerra, contended that there remained broad exemptions in the law, to protect websites acting in good faith. Based on the August ruling in Sacramento, he said he had been left to prosecute Backpage.com on charges of conspiracy and money laundering.

“We have to prove criminal intent,” he said. “I’ve got to prove that it’s sex trafficking and that the defendants intentionally violated that law. If we don’t have the tools, the only winners are those who go to the internet.”

It remains unclear when the bill might receive a vote, but there is a growing campaign to make it law. 21st Century Fox, the parent company of Fox News, came out in favor of the bill last week and accused opponents of engaging in “hyperbole and scare tactics”. Public figures including the [comedian Amy Schumer](#) and former UN ambassador Samantha Power issued statements of support.

One prominent lawmaker on the Senate committee sided with tech companies. Ron Wyden of Oregon, a vocal advocate of online privacy, said the bill would simply drive the worst behavior underground.

“The legislation being considered today is the wrong answer to an important question,” he said.

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